DANGLING LEGS by Woojin

Their legs dangled over the cement wall. The setting sun splashed a dull red paint over the city smog, and long shadows dwelled like murky puddles on the dusty rooftop behind them.

The two boys’ shadows had moved noticeably. An overburdened ashtray sat between them, completing the trio. There was a silence now, like one that lingers after a dense statement. But it was not awkward. Both minds were simultaneous in their intense contemplation.

The one on the left was taller. His broad shoulders angled inwards. Every time he tapped his cigarette, muscles on the side of his ribcage knotted under his flimsy shirt. A nonchalant tousle of hair would soon follow, and the messiness highlighted his sharp jaw-line.

“I don’t know,” he said casually, as boys will often do when revealing the inmost parts of their hearts. “Maybe it’s all the same. And,” he hesitated, “I’m scared—No, not scared,” he quickly retracted. He spoke to the apartment building across from them. Neither one made eye contact, because their vulnerability would be betrayed. “What if, what if I go to college and none of this goes away?”

The silence returned, and only faltered with a sigh and another drag.

The boy on the right looked down. The ground was ten floors away. With one jump he could be weightless for a little while.

This secluded place felt like the top of the city, a refuge from the turmoil below. The constant drone of distant cars became almost a peaceful melody up here.

He thought about his friend on the left. Armed with a guilty smile and irresistible bad-boy charm, his friend was always calm, always at ease. Girls would be helpless to his enchanting conversation. He nodded at the right times, maintained eye contact long enough to be mischievous, and left before he became overbearing but sufficiently early to be missed.

Yet he here sat; when all was still, he was in disorder. The silence was welcoming.

“I am scared,” he admitted. “I’m scared that it’s me. Not my parents, not the girls, not this damned cigarette. That wherever I go, whatever I do, I’ll carry around this, this,” he faltered, “this brokenness. All I do now is try to escape. Do you know? Do you know?”

The boy on the left turned to face his friend. The cigarette was floating down, down, and down. There was wildness in his eyes; his eyebrows were contorted in pain. He cringed and held his eyes steadfast on his friends’. His eyes darted back and forth, searching for—needing—an answer.

Uncomfortable, the boy on the right returned the gaze only briefly. He had no answer to give, so instead, he asked a question.

“Do your parents still bother you about grades?” It was a silly question. He only asked because he wanted this frenzy to pass, so that he could see his indifferent friend again.

His friend seemed not to hear. Instead, he continued in his brokenness.

“Do you know? I know that every time I lie down to sleep, I know I won’t. I know that when it’s only me and my thoughts, I get butchered, every single time. So I’m piss scared. It scares the hell out of me to be alone.”

His voice stuttered higher; his hands were frantic now. He knocked over the ashtray as he edged closer to his friend. Buds fell like rain below.

“You know what I dreamt about yesterday? The time when I was eight. We made cards for Parent’s Day, and well, my step-mom isn’t my mom, so I made a card for my father. It was a stupid thing. But I worked hard. Poured my damn heart into it. I remember writing ‘I love you, Dad,’ hoping to get just even a hug—a smile—back. I remember the old man sitting on his couch watching some stupid highlight reels. Giddy as hell, I put the card on his lap. And you know what he says? You know what he says?”

The clank of the ashtray on the cement rang in the distance. The boy on the right could only listen in a daze. His mind spinning, the boy had no idea how to respond. This was the friend he looked up to, the one he wanted to be like. Even the cigarettes weren’t his. They were only a part of the façade. Now his friend did not appear like such a hero.

But the boy on the left did not care. A numbness for so long had detonated, and a dire need to connect to somebody was all that mattered. His soul screamed for someone to care. A maniacal laughter whelmed up from within. With the delirious chuckle, a tear glistened on his left cheek.

“He didn’t even look at me. He opened the card, and said this. He said, ‘Show me when you do something useful.’ That was it. I cried myself to sleep that night. I was eight. Eight, man, eight.

“And you know what? He’s still the same. He only cares about money. ‘Get good grades,’ he says. ‘Get into a good university, like me.’ But what good is a good university when you let your wife drink herself to death because you weren’t ever home from work? What good is a good university when you can’t even tell your son that you love him? I don’t care anymore. I’m done caring.”

Raindrops bounced off the metal containers. The boy on the left held dearly on to his friend’s shirt, as if clinging for his life. Tears mixed with rain. His friend was frozen and hypnotized.

“I don’t need him. I don’t need anyone to tell me how to be a man. He never taught me to play soccer, but I got pretty damn good. He never told me about girls, but look who’s going to prom with me. And he never read a single one of my essays but all the colleges loved them. He doesn’t need me, and I sure as hell don’t need him!”

His voice was a shriek in the drowning thud of the rain. He wept bitterly. His friend looked away, embarrassed. For a moment, he considered patting him on the back, but decided against it. Instead, he got off the wall, and stood with his back to his weeping friend.

Then, it was just a whisper. “Why doesn’t he love me, man?” It was plea. The boy on the right shivered.

“I don’t know, man,” he offered quietly. “I don’t know.”

The rain gathered in the small ditches on the edges of the rooftop. The black dust washed with the gallons flooding through the pipe jutting out. A person in the apartment building across shut the windows. They were alone.

The boy on the left still sat, head in hands, over the wet wall. His friend looked back, and almost said something. But he didn’t. He walked toward the door, and left.

We were just boys. My friend faced the world alone, and that is too big of a burden for just a boy. The world is a harsh place, and any innocence we had was swiftly lost. We were boys searching for purpose. We certainly didn’t find it in the world. We weren’t men with meaning.

I walked all the way down ten flights of stairs, but my friend got down before me. I lost my innocence that day, and that day, I found the world.